

Getting more out of English language teaching in Japanese universities

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*'The classroom is the crucible - the place where teachers and learners come together
and language learning, we hope, happens.'*

(Gaies, 1980 cited in Allwright & Bailey, 1991)

Introduction

Some time ago, I received an e-mail from one of my ex-university students in which he complained about the quality of some of the English classes he had been taking at a Japanese university. He was particularly unhappy with the standards in his Oral English class (not taught by me!) and made the following comments:

I'm glad my Oral English class will end in three times. This class is really boring. Also it is a waste of money and time. I can't believe that we have to pay an expensive fee to this class. Last class, I felt I was taking elementary school's class. We wrote "fortune slips" (omikuzi?) and exchanged them with other classmates. How can we improve our communicative skill with them?? By taking the same class in different classes and teachers, I really felt the importance of teacher's quality.

The e-mail interested me because it is rare for students to express their opinions about classes in such a forthright way but to what extent are these comments indicative of more general dissatisfaction amongst students with respect to their EFL classes? Was this student's negative evaluation of this particular teacher or lesson justified? Who exactly is responsible in a situation such as this and what can we do to get more out of English language teaching in Japanese universities? These issues are discussed in detail below in the hope that the discussion may encourage positive changes within the university system.

Success in language learning ~ the teacher's responsibility?

Although I agree whole-heartedly with my student's sentiment that teacher quality is a fundamental part of successful language learning, there is more to it than that. The classroom is a complex place ~ a crucible where different elements interact and react to produce learning. The principal agents involved in this interaction are the teacher, the materials and the learners so it is to these areas that we should look if we want to improve the situation:

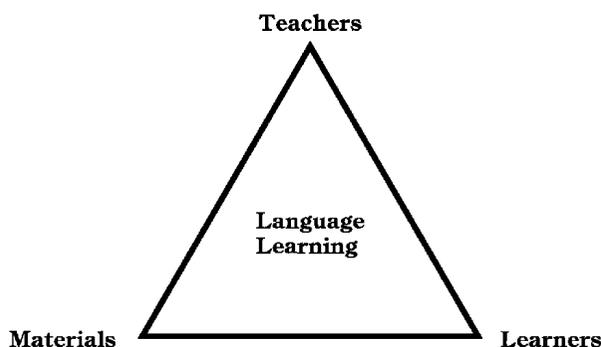


Figure 1: The principal influences on language learning in the classroom

Let us look at each of these influences in turn to assess how language learning might be enhanced in the classroom through changes.

1. The Learners

The model illustrated above acknowledges the important role of learners in the learning process, as Ellis (1982: 73) asserts:

‘...successful language learning does not depend solely on good materials and good teaching, but also on the general and individual strategies employed by the learner. Learners are not computers which the teacher has to program; they actively construct their own syllabuses which influence (if not determine) the route that learning follows.’

In Japan, however, students are not trained to be independent learners and may actually react against attempts to make them so. One teacher, who had only recently arrived in the country, caused a rebellion in her classes when she suggested to her students that they should decide the

course syllabus rather than her. In their view, she was failing in her responsibilities by passing the buck in this way. In theory, giving learners more of a say in curriculum design should increase the likelihood of courses being regarded as motivating and relevant. However, if the teacher loses the confidence of the learners by attempting to implement a negotiated syllabus against their will, and against the cultural norms, then any potential benefits of the learner-centred curriculum will be lost.

Ellis's model of student-teacher interaction outlined above sees students as being actively engaged in lessons, questioning or challenging the teacher's ideas and moving the classroom discourse in unpredictable ways to suit their own particular needs. In the western view of education, this would be regarded as a positive characteristic because, through active participation, learners are ensuring that the input is tailored to meet their specific interests or requirements in a way that 'teacher-fronted' lectures may not.

This type of classroom discourse differs markedly from that seen in Asian classes and comes as a shock to students who study abroad in western universities, as Sun-yu, a Taiwanese student, discovered as she struggled to adapt to graduate-level education at an American university:

'When I first came here, I couldn't believe how much Americans talked in class. In Taiwan, students never speak in class unless the teacher calls on them. At first, I was afraid to talk in class because I thought I might ask a question that I should know the answer, or I might say something that was already said. I was afraid that what was interesting for me might not be interesting to the rest of the students. I kept waiting for my teachers to call on me, but they never did. Then I realized that this way of talking was what teachers expected, and so I would have to get used to it. I think I have talked more in classes here than all my years of schooling in Taiwan.' (Allwright & Bailey, 1991: 53)

Learners in Japan are not commonly encouraged to engage in this manner with the teacher, in fact, according to some researchers, there is often positive pressure *not* to act in this way:

'Students receive knowledge from the teacher in an unquestioning manner. This encourages passivity among students and discourages active, more student-centred forms of instruction. Indeed, "In Japanese schools, the biggest crime committed against teachers is the act of asking a question, presenting a counter-argument, explaining one's position or situation, all of which are taken to be 'talking back' and acts of rebellion (Yoneyama 1999: 113).'" (McVeigh, 2002: 112/13)

Not only are students often unwilling to interact with their teacher, frequently they are also

reluctant to interact with each other too. My own university classes tend to split down the middle on gender lines, with females on one side and males on the other. Students generally sit with the same partners all year, if left to their own devices, and in many classes students seem to be rather uneasy with each other and noticeably on edge. This presence of tension in Japanese university classes has also been noted by McVeigh:

‘When I privately asked students whom I had come to know why they would “pretend not to know,” why they would not answer in class, or would refuse to say anything, they usually said that they “were afraid of making mistakes,” “were afraid of instructors,” “thinking too hard,” “I’m too nervous,” “I feel tense.” Others explained that being in the classroom is a “strained situation” or has a “strange atmosphere”. Some students had a negative attitude toward those who answered in class: “a person who answers cannot be a nice person”; “such students are imprudent”; “students who answer are being bold.”’ (ibid: 99)

In a traditional university lecture where the focus is on transference of knowledge and interaction between learners is minimal, perhaps these characteristics are less important but in a Communicative English class, where the focus is on listening and speaking skill development, they have serious consequences. If students have no confidence or desire to talk to the people around them in the class, they are unlikely to improve their communicative skills. It is difficult for teachers to find ways to break down these invisible barriers in the classroom and I would argue that one positive step would be a change in attitude from students themselves. By recognising their own crucial role in the learning process and their potential ability to hijack the process through passive resistance, perhaps they can be encouraged to co-operate with the teacher to create a more constructive learning environment. To encourage this, teachers could, firstly, raise students’ awareness of other styles of classroom interaction in different countries, for example, showing the high levels of student participation abroad through video clips. Learners could also be given the role of teacher occasionally in class, perhaps teaching small language points to their classmates, in order to see that, without participation from the whole group, they will find it extremely difficult to move the lesson forward. Teachers should encourage students to see errors as a positive feature of classwork; after all, if mistakes or misunderstandings are hidden away from the eyes of the teacher or classmates, how can learning take place? Learning a language is, by its nature, a process of experimentation, of testing out hypotheses and seeing what works:

The acquisition of competence is not accumulative but adaptive: learners proceed not by adding items of knowledge or ability, but by a process of continual revision and reconstruction. In other words, learning is

necessarily a process of recurrent unlearning and relearning, whereby encoding rules and conventions for their use are modified, extended, realigned, or abandoned altogether to accommodate new language data.' (Widdowson, 2003: 140/1)

The path to second language proficiency passes through many inter-language stages where mistakes, such as 'I goed' instead of 'I went', actually demonstrate *advances* in a learner's level of understanding (in this case the misapplication of the rule for -ed endings in past tense verbs).

2. The Materials

What learners are given to work with in the class, both the materials themselves and the kinds of tasks that are selected to exploit them, naturally have a huge impact on motivation and L2 acquisition. In my own doctorate research, I have been conducting a classroom-based trial at Kansai Gaidai University to investigate exactly how much of an impact the choice of materials can actually have on learners' developing communicative competence. Over the course of the 2004/2005 academic year, a control and experimental group of second year Communicative English students were each given distinct input by the same teacher (the author). The control group received input from two standard ELT textbooks, containing material largely contrived specifically for language learning. The vocabulary and grammar were carefully controlled and the listening tasks were purged of many of the discourse features of natural conversation. The experimental group, in contrast, received only authentic input for the entire course (authentic here is defined as material originally written for the consumption of native speakers), consisting largely of DVD scenes from American and British dramas, films and documentaries. This authentic input was used to raise learners' awareness of the natural features of spoken English; hesitation devices, discourse markers, spoken genres, communication strategies, body language, etc. and then used as a jumping off point into role-plays, group discussions and presentations. The kinds of tasks used in the classroom varied between the groups to suit the materials being used, however both focussed primarily on listening and speaking skills. How their overall communicative competence developed over the year was measured with eight separate pre- and post-course tests, focussing on vocabulary, phonology, reading skills, grammar, listening skills, pragmatic competence, a student-native speaker interview and a student-student role-play task. Although the results are still being analysed at the time of publication, preliminary results suggest a difference between the two groups with the experimental group improving their overall communicative competence by around 8.1%, compared to around 6% for the control group. The major gains for the experimental group were in oral fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary

while the control group showed greater improvements in only one area, grammar. Although it is too early to jump to any conclusions from these results, they do tend to suggest that the materials selected for use in the classroom can have a significant impact on students' developing communicative competence.

What is communicative competence exactly? The model of communicative competence aims to outline the different areas of competence that a learner must master in order to communicate effectively in the L2. It consists of 5 categories: linguistic competence; sociopragmatic competence; pragmalinguistic competence; strategic competence & discourse competence (for further details see: Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983 & Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell, 1995).

An effective communicator in a foreign language, one who is able to interact appropriately in a variety of contexts, is balanced in all these different areas. However, overall communicative competence can be skewed by the types of materials exploited in the classroom. With respect to Japanese learners, it is my impression that linguistic competence is often developed at the expense of the other types of competence because the input they receive in the classroom is biased towards knowledge of grammar, syntax and lexis and not enough attention is paid to how this language can be applied in different contexts to create natural, culturally appropriate, coherent discourse. Furthermore, more attention is given to the abstract knowledge itself than the ability to use language for communicative purposes. The reasons for this are well documented and, in part, relate to the dominance of linguistic theories in English language teaching:

'Until recently, theories of second language learning have followed, rather narrowly, models developed in linguistic theory. Thus it was widely assumed that transformational-generative grammar could serve both as a general model for language and as an explanatory model for second language learning. Within much L 2 theory and research the primacy of syntax has been taken for granted and the syntactic paradigm has been dominant. While phonology and other areas have not been ignored, second language learning has largely been described as a continuum of gradually complexifying syntactic systems.' (Schmidt & Richards, 1980: 142)

This approach to English language teaching has out-lived the theories which underpin it and the reasons for this probably have more to do with satisfying teacher and institutional needs than meeting the learner's needs, as Canale (1983: 14) points out:

‘Perhaps knowledge-oriented approaches, with their emphasis on controlled drills and explanation of rules, are practical for dealing with problems such as large groups of learners, short class periods, lack of teachers who are communicatively competent in the second language, and classroom discipline.’

An example of how materials can affect learners’ developing communicative competence.

The differences in overall gains in communicative competence seen with my own classroom-based research were the result of comparing authentic materials with textbooks based on sound pedagogy. Not all course books used in Japan can claim this and, when materials are of poor quality, acquisition of the L2 is likely to be even more compromised. An example of this from the Japanese university context is *Modern English Cycle One* (1985). It claims in the preface to offer ‘a wealth of communication exercises, each preceded by the necessary fluency training’ but what learners are actually exposed to is a series of grammar points presented in contrived and unlikely scenarios, followed by a series of exercises where the learners practise manipulating the target language, transforming one form into another or constructing sentences based on cue words. For example in lesson ten, *must have* and *would have* are presented together. The presentation centres around a cartoon of two women talking together, possibly in an office corridor (although the picture is vague with respect to their location):

A: The salary raise must have been encouraging.

B: It was. You would have been encouraged too.

A: I’m sure I would have been *very* encouraged.

We never discover any more about the context however; who are these women? What is their relationship to each other? Are they old friends or recent acquaintances? Which country are they working in? Where exactly are they working? Why was the salary raise encouraging and how does A deduce this? Why does B say ‘You would have been encouraged too’? Didn’t A get a raise? Why not? How did this conversation come about in the corridor, in other words, what prompted this topic to be raised in the first place? How did the conversation begin and end? Without this sort of contextual information learners will certainly not be able to develop their sociopragmatic competence because that relies on an appreciation of what language is appropriate to a specific relationship in a specific culture. Pragmalinguistic competence is unlikely to be developed either since that involves understanding the *communicative intent* of linguistic forms and a knowledge of appropriate ways to express speech acts in a particular context. Without a

clearer context for this dialogue it is difficult to know exactly what the communicative intent was. Is A being sarcastic or serious when she says the raise ‘must have been encouraging’? Is she genuinely happy for B or is she bitter that she didn’t get a raise too? Sadly, we will never find out. Strategic competence is not developed through this (or any other) dialogue in the textbook either. This relies on learners seeing how to cope with difficulties in real time communication but since no problems are ever encountered by the speakers in the texts (no misunderstandings; no loss for words; no unfinished sentences or repetitions) we are left with the impression that native speakers always get things right.

Learners are not only given an unrealistic model to live up to, they are never shown what to do in the meantime while they struggle to reach some level of proficiency. Finally, discourse competence is not developed since learners are only given a fragment of the whole conversation as a model. They are not shown the starting or closing sequences nor how the topic of ‘raises’ was introduced coherently into the conversation. Furthermore, the repetition of encouraged/encouraging in all three turns is highly unnatural and does not represent normal conversation where speakers typically exploit ‘relexicalisation’ to avoid repeating their own or each other’s words, moving from one synonym to another, from synonyms to antonyms and from superordinates to hyponyms. This is something McCarthy (1991: 67) warns against:

‘materials writers who create their own texts or who simplify naturally occurring ones should remember that disturbing the lexical patterns of texts may lead to unnaturalness and inauthenticity at the discourse level; simplification may mean an unnatural amount of repetition, for example, compared with the variation between exact repetition and reiteration by other means found in natural texts.’

I don’t see how language materials such as these even help to develop linguistic competence particularly effectively; the lack of context means that the past reference of *must have been* and *would have been* is not made clear. In addition, the effect on meaning of the speaker’s choice of modal auxiliary is not explained; *must* signalling that speaker A was certain about her evaluation of the past event and *would* indicating a hypothetical event in the past. These are very subtle changes in meaning and if learners are to have any hope of making these form-meaning connections, they need to be given contextualised examples followed by careful concept checking and meaningful practice where they have to make informed decisions on which form to use. Instead, in this particular textbook, students are expected to regurgitate the form, quite possibly with little idea about what they are saying.

In summary, the materials selected for use in the classroom have a major impact on the learning that can potentially take place. If textbooks *are* to be used, they need to be appropriate to the level of the students and develop a broader communicative competence through a focus on, not just grammar forms, but also lexis, phonology, pragmatic features such as register and politeness, discourse, culture and so on, in clearly contextualised and motivating texts. They also need to provide learners with adequate opportunities to develop the ‘four skills’ (listening, speaking, reading & writing), to the extent appropriate to the aims of the course, in personalised and meaningful tasks. Furthermore, by incorporating more authentic material into the classroom, for example through effective exploitation of videos or DVDs, I believe that learners will have the opportunity to expand their competence in new areas.

3. The Teachers

To return to the teacher mentioned in the e-mail above, to what extent is he responsible for the negative evaluation of his lesson? Was he an experienced, well-qualified professional struggling to deal as best as he could with inadequate materials foisted on him by his university? Was the student’s response based on a personal grudge and therefore unrepresentative of the majority of the class or were there real weaknesses in the teacher’s lesson? We will never know for sure since we only have a single, subjective account of what happened. It is possible that in his activity, asking students to write ‘fortune slips’ for each other, the teacher had a serious learning aim ~ perhaps personalised practice of the use of ‘will’ to make future predictions. However, I suspect from the student’s description and the timing of this activity at the end of term that this was simply a ‘time-killer’, keeping the students occupied for some, or all, of the lesson with no clearly formulated pedagogical aims.

This kind of ‘eikaiwa’ lesson, lacking in well-formulated aims or insights into the target language, is something often observed from trainees in the initial stages of a pre-service teacher-training course such as the University of Cambridge CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults).¹⁾ My experiences as a teacher trainer on this course have led me to the conclusion that a number of misconceptions exist in Japan in relation to English Language Teaching:

Misconception 1: Native speakers, as proficient speakers of the L1, are inherently qualified to teach their own language.

There seems to be an unspoken assumption within Japanese universities that being a native speaker of English automatically qualifies a person to teach EFL. Nothing could be further from the truth; native speakers generally have very poor language awareness and, although fluent themselves, have no idea what unconscious knowledge they possess which allows them to speak fluently. In this respect, non-native teachers (NNS teachers) are often superior (though not always) to native speakers and may produce better results in the classroom:

It is arguable, as a general principle, that non-native teachers may, in fact, be better qualified than native speakers, if they have gone through the complex process of acquiring English as a second or foreign language, have insight into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners, a detailed awareness of how mother tongue and target language differ and what is difficult for learners and first-hand experience of using a second or foreign language. Phillipson (1992: 15)

This superiority of NNS teachers was, for example, found by Derivry-Plard (2004) who analysed the results of 600 foreign language students being taught by either non-native or native-speaker teachers in France and concluded that the NNS teachers' students outperformed the NS teachers' students.

Of course, native speaker teachers of English can have some advantages in the classroom. They can familiarise students with different accents from around the world and can also provide them with insights into other cultures that are perhaps not available to NNS teachers. They are also very often what learners themselves actually want ~ 'real' English from 'real' native speakers.

To return to the theme of NS language awareness, I argued above that this is something that needs to be explicitly taught to English language teachers since, as native speakers, we use our L1 fluently without any explicit awareness of the knowledge we have which allows us to *be* fluent. This is something which is apparent, for example, on the CELTA course where trainee teachers, in the initial stages, often demonstrate poor understanding of the grammar they are trying to teach and attempt to skirt over any concrete focus on their target language in favour of a 'conversation class'. Their rationale seems to be along the lines that by keeping the students talking about 'topics', they can avoid any difficult questions on meaning, form or phonology. A

lack of language awareness is also often evident in trainees' pre-course tasks where they are asked to analyse students' grammar and vocabulary mistakes and explain how they would clarify these errors in the classroom. Below are some sample questions, adapted from a pre-course task, to illustrate.

Cambridge University CELTA pre-course tasks.

1. Identify the errors in the following sentences, correct them and explain the nature of the problem:
 - a) I've been travelling for about six months now but I'm quite boring with it now to be honest. I'll fly back to Europe next week though, I confirmed my ticket yesterday.
 - b) Oh, that's my girlfriend calling me. She's waiting to go for dinner. I don't have to be late.
2. The following pairs of words often cause confusion among students. Give an example sentence for each word that makes the meaning clear and explain the difference in meaning and usage:
 - a) slim/thin
 - b) hinder/prevent

(See footnotes for suggested answers.ⁱⁱⁱ⁾)

My point here then, is that native speakers (of any language) require training in order to become effective teachers of their L1. Ask Joe Bloggs on the street in America, Australia or Britain to answer the task above and I would expect very poor responses.

Lack of language awareness is only one of the problems commonly seen in unqualified or inexperienced teachers in the initial stages of a pre-service course, however. Other typical weaknesses include:

- a) Being teacher-centred: trainees come to the course with the image of the teacher as 'impartor of knowledge' and tend to spend a disproportionate amount of time in plenary sessions, talking at students rather than designing student-centred tasks which encourage learners to do more cognitive processing and give them more opportunities to develop their speaking skills. Strevens (1980: 4) distinguishes between three possible roles for teachers in the classroom with 'the educator' being the ideal model:

'The *instructor* limits himself, deliberately or through immaturity, to presentation, to the techniques of instruction, to being an informant and not much more... The *teacher* is a good instructor, but more than an instructor; he is engaged in the deliberate management of learning and, therefore, with aims and goals and curricula and syllabuses and materials; with the maintenance and improvement of professional standards for teachers...The *educator* is a good teacher, but more than a teacher; he is also concerned with the relation, in terms of the learner, between language tuition and all the other elements in the student's curriculum; with the general social needs which his subject encounters and with how to meet other needs not yet adequately catered to by language teachers; with the function of education not simply for the individual, but within the wider population of one's own society and for mankind as a whole.' (Stevens, 1980: 4)

- b) Language grading: inexperienced teachers are often unable to control their speech rate or language complexity whilst giving instructions to learners and produce utterances such as, 'Right, so all I want you to do is quickly skim this text and jot down any answers to the gist questions, then see if you and your partner agree or not' which, to a low-level student, will sound something like, 'Right, blah, blah, blah, text, blah, blah, blah, answers, blah, blah, blah, questions, blah, blah, blah'. Setting up activities carefully is crucial for successful lessons and is most effectively done by *modelling* activities; showing through demonstration rather than verbally explaining tasks.
- c) Monitoring: Just setting up activities and letting them run is insufficient for creating successful lessons. Teachers need to monitor learners closely while they are completing tasks in order to find out whether instructions have been understood and to judge how effectively students are coping with target language. Common problems should be noted so that they can be effectively dealt with at the post-task stage and so that teachers can judge learners' success with the task.
- d) Error correction: trainees are generally very poor at dealing with errors that arise naturally during the course of a lesson. Since they do not have any time to think about the errors and have to react 'on the spot', they often prefer to respond with a "good good" and move quickly on, without identifying the error or encouraging self/peer-correction. Errors arising during a lesson like this are, potentially, excellent *learning opportunities* and need to be exploited with effective error correction techniques.

Misconception 2: A Masters qualification is a good foundation for teaching EFL in Japanese universities.

Universities, in Japan just as any other country, are understandably concerned with their repu-

tation in society at large. The qualifications of their instructors and the number of publications they produce is therefore important in terms of enhancing their prestige and attracting students and funding. However, most M.A. courses *do not prepare teachers for the day-to-day realities of the classroom*. Even a Master's course in linguistics or ELT - at least in the United Kingdom - has little or no focus on language awareness or the classroom techniques emphasised in practical teaching courses. Neither does it have 'hands-on' teaching practice, observed by qualified teacher-trainers.

An understanding of the theoretical concepts behind English language teaching is, without doubt, useful for teachers but the uncomfortable reality is that an M.A., even in linguistics or ELT, is inadequate training in itself to prepare teachers for the realities of the classroom. This issue is something that universities are beginning to recognise in the United Kingdom and some are now attempting to incorporate a practical element into their M.A. courses. Master's programs in linguistics or ELT in the United States already have substantial student teaching internships as components of their courses so the criticisms above are less relevant to them.

To what extent are under-performing teachers aware of dissatisfaction in their classes?

University students in Japan are often perhaps reluctant to express negative comments, such as those voiced in the e-mail above, directly to their teachers or the university administrative staff for fear that it might, somehow, affect their final grade. This means that the principal official channel for feedback is the course evaluation questionnaire, administered at the end of each term. Although these questionnaires are useful in providing teachers and institutions with an overall 'feel' for how classes are going, they provide little information that can support teacher development if things are not going so well.

Students' evaluation of their teachers also suffers from the so called 'halo effect', the tendency for humans to respond positively to a person they like:

'... it is possible that the results [of evaluations] would show that a popular teacher (e.g., one who had lots of parties for the students) was punctual, hardworking and firm in discipline (when, in fact, he was often late, ill prepared, and lax), simply because the students liked him. Pity any teacher who was truly punctual,

hardworking and firm but not the life of the party!' (Brown, 1988: 33).

This might explain why answers on student course-evaluations to the statement, 'The instructor started and ended class on time' (something one would imagine there could be no dispute about), can vary for the same class from 'never' to 'always'. Presumably the response given depends on how much any particular student liked the teacher in question. This type of evaluation, therefore, needs to be viewed with a certain amount of caution.

Another problem with students evaluating the teaching they receive is that, although as 'consumers' their voices should be heard, they do not always have the pedagogical awareness to understand why their teacher makes certain choices in the lesson. I once asked my students to extract all the verbs from an oral narrative and place them into columns according to the tense used. My actual aim was to raise their awareness of the widespread use of present simple & progressive tenses (the so-called historic present) in an oral narrative to foreground particular events, for example, when a police officer is describing an incident with a suspicious-looking driver: "So I'm pointing my gun at his face and I'm screaming 'Freeze, don't move!'" The historic present is used at the peak of the narrative to highlight it and dramatise the story. However, some students took this task at face value and complained in their student diaries:

'Next we put the verbs from the story in the correct column the paper. I felt a bit bored. So it's very easy.'

'Next, we divided a lot of verb into five groups. They were Past simple, Present simple, Present continuous, Present perfect and Future. It was easy for me to do that. I am good at English grammar.'

In summary then, not only is official student feedback on teacher performance not always a reliable indicator of what is actually happening inside classes, it provides little opportunity for inexperienced or poorly qualified teachers to improve. For teacher development to begin to take place within the university system, in-service training needs to be implemented. This could, for example, take the form of 'in-house' teacher training sessions or lesson observations by peers so that teachers may provide objective feedback to each other on the success of their classes and make suggestions on how to improve. If this is done in a non-threatening atmosphere where the aim is *development* rather than *evaluation*, so that teachers do not feel that their jobs are on the line, there is real hope for improvement.

Conclusion

Beginning with the frank comments of a university student, I have tried to explore some of the issues contributing to ineffective language learning within the Japanese education system. Focussing on the three principal contributing factors to successful language learning, the learners, the materials and the teachers, I conclude that there is potential for improvement on all levels. Four specific recommendations are made:

- a) Learners need to be encouraged, and shown *how*, to take a more active role in the classroom and more responsibility for their own learning.
- b) Materials for use in the classroom need to be carefully selected to ensure effective development of learners' communicative competence.
- c) University teachers need to be selected on the basis of practical teaching qualifications as well as academic excellence.
- d) Universities would benefit from some form of in-service training and peer observation for teachers in order to ensure that teaching meets minimum standards and to allow staff members an opportunity to improve their classroom skills.

With the changing demographics and falling student numbers in Japan, the pressure on universities to improve will only increase over the next decade, making survival increasingly difficult for institutions which are only concerned with a 'veneer' of professionalism. Equally, teachers without basic teaching qualifications will find it increasingly difficult to secure employment as the competition stiffens. I hope that this discussion might encourage positive changes at both a personal and institutional level.

NOTES

- i) The University of Cambridge CELTA course is an initial qualification aimed at new or practising teachers without any formal practical training and is regarded internationally as the leading, practical, initial qualification in English Language Teaching. It is a prerequisite for employment in a large number of reputable language training centres worldwide and is designed to lead on to the higher practical qualification of the University of Cambridge DELTA (Diploma). Courses are held at 250 approved centres in over 40 countries, including part-time (20 weeks) and full-time (4 weeks) courses in Kobe and Tokyo. The School for International Training (SIT) in Vermont, USA offer a similar qualification, the TESOL Certificate but it is less widely available.

- ii) 1. a) 'I'm quite boring with it now' should read 'I'm quite *bored* with it now'. Some adjectives have both -ed & -ing forms which learners naturally confuse. This variation is systematic in terms of meaning, however, so is easily clarified. -ed adjectives describe how people feel, for example, 'She was very excited about her holiday' or 'I'm bored with this book'. -ing adjectives describe a situation, person or thing & how it makes someone feel, for example, 'He had an interesting life' or 'He's a really boring teacher'. Learners need to have these two forms contrasted, followed controlled practice where they have to make appropriate choices between the two forms.

'I'll fly back to Europe next week' should read 'I'm *going to fly*' or 'I'm *flying*'. This confusion with future tenses is common with Japanese learners, even after 6 years of compulsory English education at school. 'Will' is inappropriate in this context because the subject has already confirmed his/her ticket. 'Will' is used when the subject is making a decision about the future *at the time of speaking*, for example, 'A: I'm really thirsty! B: I'll get you a drink'. In contrast 'be going to' is used to talk about future events already decided at the moment of speaking and present progressive tense is used when events are more fixed in the speaker's mind, for example, 'I'm leaving on the 6pm train tomorrow; my seat is already booked'. Speakers can choose between either form in the example, depending how 'fixed' the future events are for them.

- b) 'I don't have to be late' should read 'I *mustn't be* late'. The root of this error relates to confusion between the forms 'must' and 'have to'. In affirmative sentences, these forms have similar meanings, suggesting obligation on the part of the speaker. However, they are *not* identical; 'must' suggests that the speaker is the person imposing rules on the listener, for example, '(A teacher speaking to students) You must do your homework every week'. 'Have to', in contrast, suggests that the speaker is conveying a rule to the listener decided by someone else, for example, 'The traffic light is red so you have to stop here'; in this case the rule for stopping at traffic lights is imposed by the government. Because of this difference, 'must' is used much less by native speakers than 'have to' since it implies a difference in status between speaker and interlocutor; it carries the message 'I say that you have to do this'. Japanese students regularly use 'must' inappropriately in this respect & risk offending native speakers by mistake. In the example sentence, the learner knows that 'must' and 'have to' have similar meaning in affirmative sentences and has made the logical assumption that 'mustn't' and 'don't have to' therefore also have similar meanings. However, they don't: 'mustn't' means something is forbidden whereas 'don't have to' means that something is not obligatory, a person has some choice over whether to do or not do something, for example, 'You don't have to eat everything on your plate' (if you want to, you can, but don't feel obliged). That is, 'not' in 'mustn't' does not negate 'must' but rather what follows (negation of an act), whereas 'not' in 'don't have to' negates 'have to' (negation of an obli-

gation).

2. a) Slim/thin: both words are adjectives, normally occurring before nouns or 'subject + be + adjective'. The difference is in connotation in the same way as 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' are. 'Slim' means 'thin in an attractive way' and is generally used to talk about women rather than men whilst 'thin' can have negative connotations and can be used to refer to either men or women. This difference needs clarifying with concept questions in the class: 'Is the person fat? (no)' 'Does he/she look good? (yes/no)'.
b) Hinder/prevent: Both verbs are concerned with someone or something obstructing an action. However, 'hinder' means that the action was difficult, but not necessarily impossible, to complete, for example, 'Although my work hinders me from spending time with my family, I make sure I keep my weekends free'. 'Prevent', on the other hand, suggests that an action is impossible to complete, for example, 'My work prevents me from spending time with my family; I never see my wife and children'. Again, concept questions such as 'Is it difficult for me to do this? (yes)' 'Was I successful in doing this? (yes/no)' are useful for clarifying these semantic differences.

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